

With a little help from some lab rats; U of T students' work gets reward Win entrepreneur prize for invention

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After countless lab hours spent tediously extracting fats from rat livers for research, Ameer Taha found himself thinking There has to be a better way.

So the PhD pharmacology student, with the help of his brother and two friends, set about inventing a machine that automates the extraction process, using "a couple of cheap motors from Radio Shack," reclaimed wood and steel, and about a year's worth of spare time tinkering in the basement of their University of Toronto dorm.

When the 1.5-square-metre prototype was finished, they found they'd stumbled on a potentially lucrative - and, as it turns out, prize-winning - idea.

That's because the technology can also be used to quickly isolate the food components - protein, cholesterol and carbohydrates - that manufacturers in Canada, the United States and Britain are legally required to analyze and list on product nutrient labels.

"As we say back home in Sudan, need is the essence of invention. I work in a lab, so I needed a way to make my job easier. But this will also help other people," said Taha, 24, who came to Toronto in 1999.

"It's a more time- and cost-effective way to do lab processes that are currently done manually," added brother Ahmed Taha, 20, a third-year U of T business student, who worked on the project along with Kristian Dixon and Leng Lay.

The invention was impressive enough to land the budding entrepreneurs first prize recently in the annual business-plan competition sponsored by The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE) and U of T's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management.

Started by a group of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs from India in 1992, TiE has 14,000 members worldwide, including 180 in Toronto. Its purpose is to provide opportunities for networking and knowledge sharing but also to encourage up-and-coming entrepreneurs, said Rajiv Mathur, its president.

This year's competition had 22 entries, double last year's number, vying for \$50,000 in prize money contributed by corporate sponsors, compared with just \$10,000 last year.

As for the winning project, "It's a fantastic idea," said Ross Wallace, director of corporate strategy for the MaRS research centre, which is providing the team with "incubation space" to refine their product, as well as other business support.

Besides food manufacturers, the product's potential market includes biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, as well as government and private labs, Ahmed Taha said.

The team has contacted several companies that have shown strong interest. Initially, they thought of pricing the equipment at \$50,000, but the judges advised doubling that because the savings to buyers could be in the millions of dollars.

Credit: Toronto Star

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